

# What You Need to Know About Gaslighting

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There I was, in the Food 4 Less parking lot, just sitting in my car. Bawling. I hadn't known where else to go. I just knew I needed somewhere safe—somewhere my mind and heart could have space. I called my mom and relayed the most recent conversation with my husband. In between sobs, I managed to get out the words: "Mom, I don't understand how this always seems to happen. I feel like I'm literally going crazy."

There hadn't been any shouting or name calling, no slamming of doors or threats. I had desperately needed to have a conversation with my husband about some things that were bothering me in our marriage. I felt lonely. He seemed distant and angry, and I couldn't understand why.

By the end of the conversation, things were twisted around—as usual. Apparently, I expected too much. Apparently, I was the one with the anger problems, not him. Apparently, he was going to "give in" to me, since he was tired of arguing. I was the one who initiated the conversation hoping for my wounds to be recognized by the one who had hurt me. In the end though, I was the one who apologized.

I couldn't put words to it, but I knew that something wasn't right. I had difficulty holding on to facts firmly, remembering who said what when. My ability to know what was "real" (my feelings and perceptions of what was going on in our marriage versus his) was getting more and more stripped away. I was so confused and felt hopeless.

And so there I sat, in that parking lot, telling my mom I felt like I was going crazy.

## What is gaslighting?

Finding my healing from the trauma caused by my husband's secret sexual behaviors was one thing. This was something else. Through the course of my marriage, I had lost so much of myself. It wasn't until almost three years after the discovery of my husband's behaviors, when I first began to study gaslighting, that things started to become clear. When I discovered the word gaslighting, I received a way to describe a big reason I was so lonely in

my marriage. When I discovered gaslighting, I began the most significant work in my journey of finding myself and my voice again, and maybe, truly, for the first time.

**Gaslighting occurs anytime someone attempts, and succeeds, to convince you that your feelings, beliefs, thoughts, or perceptions of reality are invalid, inaccurate, or untrue.** (Well, that's my working definition, anyway.) Most people don't know that this is what they are doing, but that doesn't change the fact that it is, indeed, exactly what they are doing.

Gaslighting consists of a number of tactics, but what sets gaslighting apart from the tactic is the result. For example, someone can use manipulation as a tactic to cause you to change the way you feel about him viewing pornography. "You're being old-fashioned and prudish. All men watch porn. It's no big deal, so why are you making it such a big deal?" The tactics being used here are manipulation and intimidation. If the desired effect occurs, you begin to doubt yourself, and eventually will relinquish your insistence that he stop viewing pornography. You've been convinced that your feelings of him being unfaithful when he views pornography aren't valid, but instead, old-fashioned and prudish. This is when manipulation results in gaslighting.

In working with my clients at [Betrayal Trauma Recovery](#), it's right about this time that silence fills the air as the revelation comes. As their mind takes in the definition of gaslighting, and the memories come flooding in of all the times they've lived it, they inevitably exclaim, "There's a word for that? I had no idea there was a word that explained what I've been experiencing!" The validation of their experience, and the relief that it wasn't just them, is palpable.

## Am I experiencing gaslighting?

Identifying gaslighting in your relationship can be scary, but it's crucial if you want to achieve a healthy relationship wherein each person's feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions are considered, respected and validated.

Gaslighting is a complex, nuanced thing. Ideally, you'll have a [knowledgeable, trauma-sensitive life coach or therapist](#) and a support system with safe people to help you sort through the confusion gaslighting causes.

The ten signs below, adapted from Dr. Robin Stern's *The Gaslight Effect*, indicate that gaslighting may be occurring in your relationship:

- You constantly second-guess yourself or have trouble making decisions.
- You ask yourself, "Am I too sensitive?" many times a day.
- You feel confused or "crazy," even at work.
- You're always apologizing to your spouse.
- You can't understand why, with apparently so many good things in your life, you aren't happier.
- You frequently make excuses for your spouse's behavior to friends and family.
- You start to avoid your spouse so as not to experience the put-downs and reality twists.
- You think twice before bringing up certain seemingly innocent topics of conversation.
- Before your spouse comes home, you run through a checklist in your head to anticipate anything you may have done "wrong" that day, or to make sure everything is "just right."
- You have the sense that you used to be a very different person—more confident, more fun-loving, and more relaxed.

The more signs you can relate to, and the stronger you resonate with them, the likelier it is that someone is gaslighting you.

## I think I'm experiencing gaslighting: what do I do now?

Now, you take a deep breath. You assure yourself that now that you have a word for what has been going on in your relationship, you can start to address it. You commit to give this topic your time and attention. You get support and help. You promise yourself that you will work to understand gaslighting, sort through the confusion, and find the truth and your voice again.

Here are a few tips to get you started:

- **Pay special attention to the feeling of confusion, or "I'm going crazy!"** If you notice you are beginning to feel this way, give yourself permission to take a "time out" until you regain grounding and clarity. Discuss the confusing situation with a trusted friend or helping professional—he or she will help you find clarity and identify the gaslighting.
- **Stay connected to your feelings!** Your feelings are valid. You don't need to justify why you feel what you feel. Don't dismiss what you feel when someone else challenges your feelings or demands you pay more attention to his or her feelings than your own.
- **Avoid the "power-struggle."** Many times we get sucked into a gaslighting episode when we get caught up in the "who has the best defense for his or her thoughts/feelings/choices" game. You can most easily recognize this by the circular nature of these types of arguments. Hours can go by and no one is budging. If you see this happening—as soon as you see it happening—ask for (and take) a break from the conversation.

If you love someone addicted to pornography, you have likely been affected by gaslighting in this relationship to some degree, and [you may be experiencing betrayal trauma](#). The effect of it runs along a scale: sometimes the effect is minimal—we hardly notice it, but other times it moves into the domain of emotional abuse and can cause us to have our internal world disrupted (trauma), losing touch with our intuition, truth, and our voice. Wherever you land, I encourage you to give gaslighting some thought. Like me, you might find that this work will change your relationships and your life forever—for the better.

When I think back to that woman in the car, I want to hold her and tell her, "I'm so sorry. I know you feel lost and confused. You're not going crazy. Soon, you will find the answers you need; soon you will feel strong and comfortable in your own skin. It will take a lot of work, but I promise, through this work you will know yourself better, and have healthier relationships that you could even dream are possible."

I'm so grateful I have the ability to look back at that situation, and say those words to myself with such truth, clarity, strength, and hope. And now with that voice, I'm honored to say those same words to you.